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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: SCHOLARS VOICE CONCERNS OVER ETHIOPIA'S
STABILITY (PART IV OF V)

REF: A. ADDIS ABABA 1111
[1](#)B. ADDIS ABABA 1357
[1](#)C. ADDIS ABABA 1358
[1](#)D. ADDIS ABABA 1359
[1](#)E. ADDIS ABABA 1229

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

PART IV OF V. THIS FIVE-PART CABLE DETAILS ETHIOPIAN
SCHOLARS' VIEWS ON THE ETHIOPIAN POLITY.

Summary

[1](#)1. (S/NF) Ethiopian scholars interviewed on the Ethiopian polity following the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front's (EPRDF) landslide victory in the April local elections (ref A) warned that the EPRDF power play, as it is unfolding, threatens Ethiopia's stability. The scholars divided roughly into two camps: Pluralists, who favored participatory democracy, and Statists, who favored a dominant EPRDF. Parts I, II and III of this series outlined how, in the scholars' views, the EPRDF is consolidating de facto one-party rule, weakening state institutions and engaging in authoritarian practices (refs B, C and D). In this Part IV, Pluralists and Statists expressed concerns about Ethiopia's stability. Pluralists described widespread discontent with the EPRDF's de facto one party rule and said that the state is not strong enough to withstand major internal or external shocks, such as a severe economic downturn, which could plunge the country into chaos. The Pluralists argued that multiparty democracy is necessary to ensure that Ethiopia's diverse constituencies continue to support the state as constituted and not abandon the political process for change but other means. The Statists posited that the EPRDF must stay in control because of its authority over the state security apparatus, but said that without internal reforms, the EPRDF's grip on the nation will slip, to everyone's detriment. Both camps decried what they described as the EPRDF's laissez-faire approach to growing radicalization among Ethiopia's Muslim populations. End Summary.

The Center May Hold...For Now

[1](#)2. (S/NF) The scholars disagreed somewhat on the immediate ramifications of the EPRDF's consolidation of its rule, although they all agreed that EPRDF consolidation will continue indefinitely in the absence of unanticipated events. Statists and some Pluralists said they believed that the

EPRDF is strong enough to pursue this approach in the near term. Other Pluralists disagreed. A Pluralist AAULAW faculty member posited "The EPRDF is politically astute. For (international donor consumption) it touts the ballot box and press freedom, while for the Ethiopian public it appeals to nationalism. They point to the threats from Eritrea, the insurgent Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), the insurgent Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and terrorism. The TPLF can hold the EPRDF coalition together because the means of state power are utilized very effectively and ideologically they are very committed. Likewise, global conditions are different than with the Dergue and the Emperor. There is little international backing for opposition groups and the West concentrates on counterterrorism objectives to the exclusion of other concerns." Another Pluralist think tank expert added, "I don't see armed resistance for quite some time, but maybe in the long run, preceded by increased banditry and crime. The prevailing mood in the countryside is disillusionment with the political process, with both the government and the opposition." However, the Pluralist former TPFL think tank expert was far more pessimistic, remarking that "The EPRDF may be able to manage for another few years, but at the cost of the country. The more offenses it commits, the more its forces are stretched, the greater the backlash." A Pluralist civil society representative agreed, noting that "Ethiopians are resilient and the EPRDF deserves its due for roads, education and basic services. But the April 2008 local elections are a clear indicator of where things are. Does anyone really expect another 17 years of EPRDF rule? There is a limit to patience."

Tenuous Stability

13. (S/NF) Most scholars, Pluralists and Statists alike, expressed grave concern about Ethiopia's long term stability and viability as a state if the EPRDF does not rapidly correct its present course. For the Pluralists, the EPRDF must meaningfully restart Ethiopia's democratic transition to avert disaster. "The status quo as it exists today cannot continue indefinitely," a Pluralist AAULAW faculty member said. "Without serious pressure on the EPRDF to reform the political process, the worst will be reaped by all of us. It is a question of time. If the drought continues (ref E), perhaps we will see total anarchy. If the elite withdraw from politics en masse, or if the EPRDF is infiltrated, or if there is an economic crisis, or if we fail in Somalia, chaos and anarchy will result." A Pluralist think tank expert in environmental matters reflected that "In an African context, regime change is obvious. The U.S. has elections but for us, the gun is useful. Everything here is in decline, from the economy to the human development index, and this adversely impacts stability. In many places, such as the Ogaden, the government already has no currency. Tigrayans are afraid their day will come. Meles is facing a crisis, with people starving, with emboldened rebels, and for all his smarts we don't know how he will handle it. You can't predict rebels. In a country where you have rebels, you have a problem. They could come to the capital at any time. Meles knows he defeated the Dergue with 60,000 troops, toppling the biggest army in Africa. Others could overthrow him with less. Meles was a rebel and he will be removed by rebels if he does not change course."

14. (S/NF) A Pluralist AAULAW faculty member emphasized, "We are not proceeding in the right direction on democracy. If anything throws things out of balance, things could get very bad very quickly. Once it goes, it is possible this government would end and chaos would reign. There's no light at the end of the tunnel yet, given the nasty circumstances. There has been an increasing fragmentation and an erosion of common values since the Dergue. If people are pushed to the edge, one day things will spin out of control. Patience and tolerance has a limit." The Pluralist civil society member added, "Ethiopia's stability is just a function of force. The EPRDF conducted local elections to legitimize its programs through the ballot box. Without Meles, however, the

EPRDF coalition likely cannot hold together. Ethiopia's stability is definitely at issue." Expressing the most pessimistic view, the Pluralist former TPLF think tank expert said "Ethiopia is macro-politically unstable, even in the short term. It is a failing state on fast forward, characterized by declining legitimacy, weakening institutions and absence of conflict management. The theoretical and empirical evidence suggests the EPRDF is leading the country to disaster. The EPRDF is driving the bus, but it is too busy spying on the passengers to look at the road. The major ethnic constituencies, the Amhara, the Oromo and the Somalis, feel humiliated and targeted. The state even threatens Tigrayans. This is all happening in a volatile subregion and is not good for peace, stability and economic development. We are seeing a progressive fragmentation of politics, identity and the economy. The EPRDF has not answered the many losers with grievances. These grievances cannot be accommodated by the current political processes. It is an open question whether EPRDF control can match the increasing frustrations. If major (opposition) political players go underground, it will be a red flag. The situation is very flammable. Meles has made his choice, using the 'developmental state' as the ideological justification for clinging to power. The opposition has not yet made its choice, but sometimes negotiation is too late. The end state will be anarchy or the emergence of a thug."

"A Choice Between Unity and Dispersion"

15. (S/NF) By contrast, the Statists saw greater risk in the method by which the EPRDF currently proceeds with one-party rule, not in one-party rule itself. They worried aloud that the Ethiopian government cannot survive major shocks, such as a deep economic or military crisis. The marginal Statist AAU Administrator said "The monolithic way, one party, one

philosophy, one direction will become moribund - but how long that takes depends. The EPRDF system of control will stay for some time - but like the Dergue or the Emperor, it is only a matter of time before some crisis intervenes." A Statist AAULAW faculty member added that "We have very important concerns about the unity of the country. The choice is unity or dispersion. If nothing changes, the EPRDF will lose its grip. Those in power have too narrow a constituency. They think they can perpetuate the party indefinitely, but it can't be done in Ethiopia. Even Tigrayans are worried. We are poor. We are polarized. So many groups are marginalized. The next secession will kill us. It is different from the past because ethnic politics is increasingly fashionable. The country cannot afford another round of conflict. Influential people are arguing for unity but people are retreating to their ethnic and religious boxes. The opposition could go to the bush. One spark could set it off. Anything can go wrong and we can have total disintegration."

Radicalization Threat

16. (S/NF) Even as the EPRDF expands its influence throughout society, the scholars expressed uniform frustration that the EPRDF appears to tolerate rising religious extremism. The Pluralist civil society representative warned that "Especially in rural areas, traditional Sufis are being challenged by Wahabis and Salafis. The traditionalists wonder why the government does not protect them as new practices are imposed. Moreover, instability in Somalia is greatly affecting Ethiopia." The Pluralist former TPLF member observed, "When institutions fail and political processes go wrong, Islamists have a honeymoon. Ethiopia is becoming fertile ground for terrorism. There will be a tipping point for radicalization." Another Pluralist think tank expert concurred, "Religious fissures are appearing. Ethiopia is in the nascent stages of radicalization. To tamp this out would require more effective administration." Despite the warning signs, the EPRDF apparently turns a blind eye to radicalization because, a former TPLF senior official

said bluntly, "it is scared."

END PART IV OF V. NEXT: SCHOLARS OFFER VIEWS ON 2010
ELECTIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD
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